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A Case study for Pilgrimage in India: Varanasi

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A Case study for Pilgrimage in India: Varanasi,

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Introduction

It is no easy to decide from where it could be convenient to start in order to speak about Varanasi. We could choose to talk about the local geography of the site, framed at East by the inwards curved bow meander of the river Ganga. On its western shores is the city, enclosed at North and South by the rivers Varanasi and Asi, two tributaries of the Ganga that give the city its modern name Varanasi, Benares in Anglo-Indian style, the old name being Kashi, the shining one, the city of light. Or alternatively we could talk about the problems bound with the process of modernization of the city, starting with the observation that most of its temples have been destroyed twice, a first time during the 11th and a second time during the 17th century, and variously and partially rebuilt in such a way that the actual map of the city corresponds only approximately to its most ancient descriptions. We could even go on touching upon the need to modernize and actualize the performance of funeral rites, through the introduction during the 19th century of the electric crematorium, with the resulting modification of timing and procedure for the incineration of the corpses. We could even close with contemporary attempts to repair the apparently irreversible increasing pollution of the water of the river Ganga, with the solid risk of a severe decrease of its flow rate, due to the practice of water drawing upstream and to dams for electric and agricultural

use However, the flow rate decrease is ineffective to prevent ~~and~~ more severe periodic overflows, with disastrous consequences for the city and its residents.

I would like to try to begin neither with the physical nor with the symbolic space, but with some stories. These stories could possibly help us to understand the peculiar relationship existing between the city and the river Gg€, and the reason why so many pilgrims come closer to the city with confidence and faith, above all in order to find there their calm and peaceful death. Relationship with the watersrelationship with death: these are the two elements that mostly strike a chord with the visitor, be he aware or not at all about the city„s history.

To talk about stories relating to the city means specifically to talk about ~~myths~~ ~~in order to~~ talk about Indian myths it is ever difficult to settle where exactly to begin with, because all the stories are interrelated, according to the very same creative trendbeing active in the so called ~~continuity~~ of Marvel Comics Group. Therefore, in order to tell ~~that~~ explaining the reason why the waters of the Gg€ river are sacred, we must deal with a number of different mythical cycles, all of them being strictly mutually interrelated.

The story of the dwarf

The very first story is the story about ~~the~~ ~~fra~~ of Vi%a disguised as a dwarf (V€mana). An enemy of the gods ~~sa~~ ~~ura~~ named Bali had obtained, through a severe practice of asceticism, the domain over all the triple world (triloka), comprising earth intermediate space and heaven. He reigned unmercifully, employing his power in order to destroy every chance of revival for both human beings and gods. The gods implore Vi%a to repair this situation. Vi%a then appears at the court of Bali disguised as a dwarf. A king seated on the throne cannot ignore ~~one~~ ~~of~~ ~~his~~ request, and the dwarf asks the concession of the measure of space that he could be able to cover within the range of three steps. Rashly Bali concedes the requested favour, and immediately gains his macrocosmic disguise: within the range of three steps he covers earth, intermediate space and heaven, in such a way to regain the triple world to celestial domain. But with his last step he misses the right measure, and with the big toe of his left foot ~~tears~~ ~~apart~~ the shell of Brahman„s egg (brahm~~f~~^a), the cover dividing the triple world from the external cosmic space surrounding our world. This event teaches that each end every act, including divine acts, entails some consequence. These consequences are not always entirely predictable, ~~they~~ ~~could~~ ~~be~~ ~~unexpected~~ from the mythopoetic point of view, from the perspective of the process of making of myths, this is a good example of heterogenesis of goals. Heterogenie der Zwecke a myth is always able to generate, even accidentally ~~aware~~, often as a kind of feedback, another myth. The mechanism of making of myths through heterogenesis of goals heterogenie der Zwecke finds an ethical explanation in terms of theodicy, through the law of retribution of karma, according to which to from each and every ethically significant causal act inevitably follows a certain specific effect.

The story of the celestial river into fiva„s hair

From the hole accidentally caused by Viṣṇu, the celestial Gaṅgā flows abruptly in, menacing to destroy the earth with the strength of her wild flow. The speed and flow rate of the celestial river is awe-inspiring, the solid risk is that the entire earth could be wiped out. In order to avoid the threat, Śiva agrees to mitigate the strength of the flow by diverting the impetuous waters into his own hair, a mass of thick interlaced dreadlocks. This mass weakens the strength of the flow, that reaches the earth drop by drop. The flow loses its impetus losing into the interlaced locks, just like a river, losing its impetus from its high torrential flow when it reaches an ample and calm alluvial plain, fertilizing the earth, and finally reaching exhausted its end into a marshy delta.

The story of the purification of ashes

Due to the above mentioned mechanism of heterogenesis of goals, Śiva's role in the story is further useful for another different goal: the waters of the celestial Gaṅgā, flowing over the earth up to giving birth to a new terrestrial river, serve as a mean of purification for the ashes of the sixty thousand sons of Śagara. These sons due to their faults had been reduced to ashes by the terrific gaze of the ascetic Kapila, disturbed by them when he was immersed in deep meditation, and were waiting in the afterworld that someone could assist them with a mean of purification. Their grandson Bhagīratha, due to compassion for the sad destiny of the restless spirits of his numerous ancestors, through his ascetic practice intercedes for them, obtaining that Gaṅgā will appear on earth, in order to purify the ashes of the deceased, that in such a way could eventually reach their intensely desired celestial peace into heaven. Precisely for this mythical reason the waters of river Gaṅgā are considered as being able to purify the ashes of the dead, and from this aetiological antecedent on, to die on Gaṅgā's shore, and to obtain that one's ashes are dispersed into the river, is a guarantee for a good death and a postfuneral fate favourable to obtain the liberation from the cycle of rebirths.

The story of Śiva's brahmanicide

Upon the preceding aetiological myth finds its narrative way a further, the story of Śiva's brahmanicide and of its purification by the very same god. This is just another way to connect the site of Vṛṇas, with death and its related symbolic universe. Once upon a time Brahmā and Viṣṇu were debating the question about which of them could be considered as the real supreme god. This debate was trudging through endlessly with no apparent solution, when suddenly in front of the two debates a huge enormous pillar of fire arose. The two agreed upon the need to undertake the quest for its origin. The one who could be able to find the pillar's origin first, will be allowed to be the proud holder of the title of supreme deity. Viṣṇu assumed his avatara aspect of the boar (Varāha) and tried to reach the inferior end of the pillar, Brahmā assumed the aspect of his own animal vehicle, the wild goose (śaśa), trying to reach the superior far end. Viṣṇu came back humbly admitting that he had been unable to reach the pillar's inferior end. On the contrary, Brahmā boasted that he had been able to find the superior end, adding the testimony of a flower of Ketakī, claiming that she had seen the divine demiurge Brahmā when he reached the peak of the fire pillar. The testimony proved to be a false one, having been extorted with fraud and intimidation. What really happened was that Brahmā had Ketakī, a flower falling

from a distance far higher, when *Śiva*'s head (crowned with flowers) had been shaken by laughter, attending the show of the vainglory of Brahmā and engaged in the pointless debate. From the middle part of the pillar suddenly emerges an aniconic form of *Śiva* (li. *godbhavam*, rt): the fire pillar is actually a igneous hypostasis, the signum of *Śiva*, the li. *ga*. The two gods immediately admit the absolute supremacy of *Śiva* upon both of them. In order to punish Brahmā's lie, *Śiva* appears in his terrific form as Bhairava, the tremendous, and with the nail of his left thumb he beheads Brahmā's fifth head, the superior head facing towards the zenith (whereas the other four heads face each of them a different cardinal point). This fifth head had immediately before appeared as a donkey head, precisely in order to declare his lie, being the source of the punishment. From this very moment on, the beheaded head of Brahmā strictly clings to Bhairava's hand. Bhairava has committed brahmanicide, the *brāhmaṇa* killing, and this fault is embodied in the female character known as *brāhmaṇī* the killing of the *brāhmaṇa*. Bhairava, also known as Kṛtābhairava because even Time itself (Kālā) fears him, becomes now the bearer of the dried head of Brahmā, the *śūla* Kapālin, the divine archetype of a class of ascetics who observe tremendous vows, and who follow a disgusting ritual behaviour, using a human skull as a bowl for alms. Now Bhairava is necessarily entangled with the crime of brahmanicide: this fault follows him wherever he goes. Brahmā's head, dried and reduced to a skull, does not leave the palm of *Śiva*'s left hand, his executioner: *Śiva* decides to become a pilgrim, wandering until he will find a place where his curse could leave him, and the skull could fall from his hand. After a number of different mythical vicissitudes (among them the encounter with the sanctimonious priests in the forest of pines, and his consequent emasculation), finally *Śiva* reaches *śrīśaila*; the sacred site where the skull falls from his hand is known as the *śrīśaila* liberation of the skull, Kapālamocana, an event occurred on the eighth day of the month of *Viśākha*, the *śrīśaila* head of the antelope, another myth bound with the deity Rudra, the vedic forerunner of *Śiva*, corresponding with November, the zodiac sign of Sagittarius, the archer. When the head falls from his hand, *Śiva* dances all around the sacred city, choosing this site as his own eternal future dwelling place. The site of Kapālamocana takes the name of the place *śrīśaila* never abandoned by the Great God, Avimukta: whoever reaches the city obtains the liberation from every fault, in effect the liberation from the cycle of rebirths, and the perennial union with *Śiva*.

The saint place of *śrīśaila*,

A man should dwell in *śrīśaila*, after having broken his fever with a stone

śrīśaila, *śrīśaila*

The ancient urban site of *śrīśaila* (the shining one, the city of light), whose citadel is known from late medieval times as *śrīśaila*, because it is encircled by the two tributaries of the *Ga* river, named *Varanā* and *Aśt*, the city called Benares by the British, is certainly the most celebrated sacred place in India. It is the dwelling place of the great god *Śiva*, who is venerated there as *Vīṭvanātha*, the Lord of the Universe. It rises upon the orographical left bank of the river *Ga*, the other shore being considered as inauspicious. Along its flight of steps in front of the river, it harbours the crematory named *śrīśaila*. Here the deceased obtains an immediate liberation from the cycle of rebirths, because of himself whispers to his ear a salvation formula (the *śrīśaila* mantra effective to cross the ocean of transmigration). It is one of the seven holy cities

(saptapur), the seat of one of the twelve signs of light (irli .ga), in a certain way the very center of each and every pilgrimage, the final goal of any pilgrimage, and even the final destination of the earthly journey of human beings. Everyone hopes to reach it, at least one time in his own life. Due to the fact that to die in the city means to reach final liberation, we can now understand the real meaning of the exhortation from the Kermapurfta: the pilgrim who reaches this site is invited to do his best in order to never leave it again. The city is now completely identified with the very same body of the god, a sacred body ideally identical with the pilgrim, whose terrestrial remains have been permanently purified.

In Veréas, the field (śetra) of Kēt, consists of the internal circuit of the five leagues (paścakro) and of an external wider circuit (urf, kro), both of them being based upon the site of Madhyamevara. The external circuit links the urban pilgrimage with Veréas, to a symbolism connected with the number 44, a figure deriving from a variety of different calculations (e.g. 12 zodiac signs multiplied for 12 months 96 •akti energies plus 48 tutelar deities). The most interesting calculation links three different cosmic levels: 9 planets (macrocosm) multiplied for 8 space directions (mesocosm) multiplied for 2 parts of the 24 hour day (clear part, day, and dark part, night, microcosm).

The main mythical reason for choosing Veréas, as the final goal of a pilgrimage must be traced in the episode during which fiva, being guilty of brahmanicide for having beheaded Brahmē (who in contrast with Vā had refused to admit fiva's supremacy during the manifestation of fiva as the icon born out of the .ga, Li.godbhēvamrti), drags himself in a draining pilgrimage, persecuted by his own crime: the beheaded and dried head of the god, that strictly adheres to his hand. When he finally comes to the holy city, the skull falls spontaneously to the ground, in the site that will be called Kapēlamocana, a liberation of the skull. This site will be one of the countless sacred places sprinkling the urban layout.

It is remarkable that the sacred place of Veréas, is not exclusive property of Hinduism: near Kapēlamocana we find a muslim cemetery: islamic graves are interposed with hindu monuments.

Proceeding towards South from Kapēlamocana we find two more sites being bound with •aiva mythical cycle of liberation from brahmanicide. Namocana (liberation from debt) and Pēpamocana (liberation from guilt).

The flight of steps granting the access to the river, the ft, is essential for religious life. The most famous of them, the Ma•ikar•ikēghā, is situated in front of the bent forward temple of fiva: here corpses are cremated. The monopoly of cremation is in charge of a group of untouchables, the dom, a clan feared and respected.

Each and every sacred place on the bank of a river presents one or more series of flight of steps (ghft), granting the possibility to accomplish the ritual baths along the shore, practically in every moment of the year, except during excessive overflow and severe drought times. Along the flight of steps baths are effected, but even a number of different activities, e.g. the selling of sacred ritual accessories, the teaching of subjects connected with the funeral rites and so on, including the selling of the firewood for the pyres.

The acme of the pilgrimage to the holy city consists in the internal circuit of Pañcakro, called *viñvara antargha yatra*, the journey of the interior embryo of the Lord of the Universe (the Lord of the Universe is the epithet of *Viṣṇu* in the form in which he is venerated in *Viṣṇu*). The journey must be effected in one out of three prescribed periods (February, March, October, November, December), but preferably during the *maheśvartara*, the great night of *Viṣṇu*, the thirteenth day of the dark half of the lunar month between February and March.

The pilgrimage of the five leagues (Pañcakro)

Starting from Madhyameśvara draw a straight line till to Dehal, *Viñyaka*, then rotate it in every direction, until you will create a circle. The sacred field included into the circle is what the Vedas call *Kṛt*, famous for liberation

Tristhalisetu

Kṛt, the city of light, the ancient name of the historical nucleus today, *Viṣṇu*, is surrounded by a sacred ring-shaped way, the *Pañcakro*, way of the five leagues, with reference to the measure of the radius of the circle formed by it. Its ideal center is the temple of *Viṣṇu* Madhyameśvara (the Lord of the middle point), destroyed by Muslims, attested only by a number of *liṅgas* plunged into the ground, along the northern shore of the river Mandakin, (today the site of the Maidagarden). According to some sources the city center is the adjacent temple of *Kṛt* *Viñyaka*. The actual center of the city, a little far away towards South, is the temple of *Viṣṇu* *Viñvanatha* (the Lord of the Universe), and it goes back to the enlargement of the ancient nucleus of *Kṛt*, to actual *Viṣṇu*, Dehal, *Viñyaka* is the name of one of *Viṣṇu*'s hypostases, the god with elephant head being one of the tutelary deities of the city. The distance between the two temples *Viṣṇu* *Viñvanatha* and Dehal, *Viñyaka* corresponds moreless to five leagues, 16 kilometers. The pilgrim covering the ring-shaped way ideally completes a pilgrimage including 108 panindian sacred sites, each of them punctually indicated by specific votive niches. The circumambulation of the way of the five leagues includes four stops, where the pilgrim finds hostels and rest opportunities, and it is supposed that it could be completed within five days.

A sacred stop particularly relevant within the circuit of *Pañcakro*, is dedicated to the five *Peśava* brothers, the main characters of *Maheśvartara*. The five brothers during their year of exile in the forest have accomplished the same pilgrim circuit, leaving as a testimony five *liṅgas*, each of them consecrated by one of them. The pilgrim is invited to travel through again the very same circuit established by the ancient epic heroes, in such a way to reactuate the myth, giving it new life, and simultaneously to transform his own contingent reality into a myth, in a prodigious symbolic mirror's game.

The *Pañcakro*, Temple (mandir) in *Kṛt*, includes an icon very important for the understanding of the mechanism of the substitute or replacement pilgrimage. It is dedicated to *Viṣṇu* *Dvādaśa*, the Lord of the twelve [signs of light]. This icon simultaneously includes within it the twelve *liṅgas* of light (*jyotirliṅga*) being present in the circuit of the signs of light within *Kṛt*, circuit that on urban scale replicates the panindian circuit of the signs of light all over the subcontinent. From the symbolic point of view, the pilgrim who accomplishes the visit to the *Pañcakro*, Temple has accomplished a real pilgrimage all over the whole of India.

The four abodes (cfr dhfm)

The four abodes (cfr dhfm) are a group of four sanctuaries situated in ideal correspondence with each of the cardinal points in the North Badar, nĒtha (UttarĒkhaṣṢa), one of the sankarite coenobia, where a pair of twin peaks is venerated, personified as the couple of divine deers (Nara and NĒrya (identified with the epic couple of the two main characters of the Bhagavadgītā that is Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa); in the West DvĒrakĒ (GujarĒt), the capital of Kṛṣṇa's reign, sunk into the sea after the disaster that caused the collapse of its people (narrated in the Appendix to the Mahābhārata the Harivaṁṣa); in the East JagannĒthapuri (Ṣa), where Kṛṣṇa is part of a ritual triad including even his brother BalarĒma and his sister SubhadrĒ; and in the South RĒmetvaram (TamiĒ NĒṢu), seat of one of the twelve signs of light (tirli .ga), sacred to RĒma, where the ritual bath into the sea is capable to purify the pilgrim from every sort of guilts. The lists of sacred sites are too numerous to be remembered in this occasion. We have left over all the cases of duplication, elaborated according to the mechanism of the substitute pilgrimage, a number of doubles occur: five different KedĒranĒtha, several Badar, nĒtha, five KĒṢ, (the most famous being the southern and the northern ones, DvĒrakĒṢ, and UttarakĒṢ,), seven Sarasvat, and so on. More, we can recite lists including 51 siddhaṢetra Ṣfields of the perfect ones siddhaṢ perfect, being a specific class of ascetics; 21 gaṢapatiṢetra Ṣfields sacred to GaṢṢa; 108 ivakṢetra, Ṣfields sacred to jiva; 274 āivasthaṢ seats sacred to jiva.

Within KĒṢ, the site of Badar, nĒtha duplicated as the NĒryat, rtha, the ford of NĒrya, in the northern area of the city, between GĒyaṢ and Trilocana GhĒṢ; the site of DvĒrakĒ is duplicated as the area of fakhoddhĒra (southwestern edge of the city); site of JagannĒthapuri is duplicated near the Asi GhĒṢ; the site of RĒmetvaram is duplicated in three different sites (RĒmakṢa in the city center; the village RĒmetvaramising along the circuit of the paĒcakra; and the temple of RĒmetvaram near the Mandir GhĒṢ).

The temples of the sanctuary of Badar, nĒtha in a little village in the high valley of the Ganges (Chamoli district, UttarĒkhaṣṢa), at the base of Mount Kamet, near 8000 meters high, are situated at a height comprised between 3100 and 4000 meters, the pilgrimage being possible only during summertime. According to tradition the main temple of Badar, nĒtha has been founded by the great master fakhoddhĒra: its main icon is dedicated to NĒrya, and is placed side by side by images of the revered couple of divine deers Nara and NĒrya (left) and of the gods GaṢṢa and Kubera (right). In its proximity there is a spring of sulphurous thermal water, the TāṢṢaku that is one of the five sacred fords (rtha) of the sanctuary (the other ones being GĒya.gĒ, KṛmĒdhĒra, PrahĒdhĒdhĒra and NĒraṢaku).

Proceeding a little northward from Badar, nĒtha we find a site where it is usual to practice postfuneral rites in order to allow the deceased ancestors to obtain the liberation from the cycle of rebirths, the BrahmakĒpala (Ṣskull of BrahmĒ) along the right bank of the river Alaknanda. The ancestors who receive the offer of the ritual meal (dha) in this site obtain immediately the perennial abode in ViṣṢa, s heaven; they do not need any further offer by living members of the family in order to maintain their existence in the afterlife, being under the direct protection of ViṣṢa.

Jagannāthapuri rises upon a gradual slope near the seashore, in a field named Purattamakōtra. According to the foundation myth of the site, its original icon, now lost, found at the foot of a fig tree, has been buried into the sand, because it caused the immediate death of those who could see it, the deity being immediately transferred in heaven. King Indradyumna, desiring to reestablish the site for the cult, received directly by Kṛṣṇa detailed instructions in order to reshape a new icon. After cutting personally a branch from the fig tree, he gave it to two priests, who shaped from it the full images of Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma and Subhadrā, adored even now.

Also in Jagannāthapuri we find five *terthas*: the pond of Mērkṣya (the eternally young sixteen years old character, favourite in *śaivism*); the banyan (*Ficus indica*) tree venerated as a hypostasis of Kṛṣṇa; Rauri, dedicated to Balarāma; the ocean and finally the pond of Indradyumna. The five *terthas* are linked together in a circuit. The pilgrim must reach the main icon in the twelfth day of the clear half of the lunar month of Mārgaśīrṣa.

The island of Rameśvaram is situated in the Ramanāthapuram district in the South Indian state of Tamil Nāḍu. It is located on Pamban Island separated from mainland India by the Pamban channel and is about 50 kilometres from Mannar Island, from Lakshadweep. It is situated in the Gulf of Mannar, where the Bay of Bengal gets mixed with the Arabian Sea. It is adored here according to tradition is supposed to have originally contributed to the liberation of Rāma from the guilt of brahmanicide, guilt caused by Rāma's killing of Ravana, the *śaśa* of brahmanic ascendency (brahmarjita), who had raped his wife Sītā, bringing her to the Theli. ga of Rameśvaram has originally been shaped by Sītā using only moist sand, but revealed to be indestructible. The main sanctuary, built in a time span of 350 years and finished near 1420 rises in the eastern coast of the island.

Highly impressive is the main passage named *corridor*, measuring approximately 120 meters long, 9 meters high and 5 to 6 meters wide. The colossal statue of Nandin, the bull being the vehicle (*vaḥana*) of *Viṣṇu*, situated in front of the sanctuary, measures 2.4 and 2.7 meters. According to its foundation myth, the main icon of the sanctuary is named Rāma Eśvara, Lord of Rāma, *śi. ga*. The huge size of the architectural spaces gives an idea of the mass dimension of pilgrimage in the site, and indirectly of the power of the temple towns, centers of political and economical power, being able to shape the destinies of royal dynasties.

The places of the five elements (*pañcabhūta*)

The five gross elements (*pañcabhūta*) of classical Indian physics are related to five sites where specific *devatās* are venerated: Kāśī (temple of *Viṣṇu* Ekāmbareśvara, Tamil Nāḍu), linked with earth element (*pṛthivī*), where the *pṛthivī. ga* is venerated; Tiruvēnaikkaval (temple of *Viṣṇu* Jambukeśvara, from *raṅgam*, Tamil Nāḍu), linked with water element (*jala*), where the *jala. ga* is venerated; Tiruvānmalai (temple of *Viṣṇu* Anantalesvara, Tamil Nāḍu), linked with fire element (*agni, tejas*), where the *tejoli. ga* is venerated; Kāśī (temple of *Viṣṇu* Kāśī, linked with wind element (*vāyu*), where the *vāyuli. ga* is venerated; Cidambaram (temple of *Viṣṇu* Śaiva, Lord of dance, Tamil Nāḍu), linked with space element (*ākāśa*), where the *ākāśali. ga* is venerated. The number five occurs frequently within *śaivism* symbology, and it is specifically honoured with a meditative formula named *pañca* syllable

formula, paṅkṣāramantra that is named *ṣivfya*, †hommage to *fiva*. The five elements, adding to them the sun, the moon and the sacrificer, form the eight cultural icons of the *śaśod,ti*). The reverse pronuciation of the *paṅkṣāramantra* sounds *ṣivfya* named. In this reverse form the phonosymbolic meaning of the formula is redable as follows: *ṣiv* means *fivaya* is the Potency of Grace (*anugraha•akti*), the one allowing liberation; *ya* is the individual conscious principle, the Self (*ftmar*); *na* is the Potency of Veiling (*tirodhfna•akti*), the one forcing the individual in bondage; and *ma* are the three fetters (*mala*) that envelope the man under bondage: *aga*, the maculation of considering himself as a limited being; *nyf*, the bond of cosmic illusion, and finally *garman*, the bond of the law oftribution of acts).

A temporary *li.ga* made of ice is spontaneously formed during cold season into a natural cave, the *Amaranētha* site in *Ka†m,r*. It attracts huge crowds of pilgrims, even though the march in order to reach the site is very hard due to *matic* reasons. As a *symtom* of the phenomenon of global warming, it is to be noted that in 1994 the *pila* could not take shape, the fact being interpreted as a sign of future calamities and inspiring severe awe. It is a peculiar typology of the *li.gas* named *†autogous* (*svayambh*), not shaped by human hands, generally made of river pebbles, as a result of water erosion. A different kind of raw material particularly pure and precious for making *li.gas* is the rock crystal.

At *Cidambaram*, all along the external corridor of the temple being object of the first circumambulation (*ṛadaṣ†f*) by the pilgrims during their visit to the site, before entering the interior part of the sanctuary, are portrayed the main codified *positi* of dance, due to the fact that the temple is dedicated to *fiva* in his hypostasis as the Lord of dance (*śaśod,ti*). The precision of the iconography is astonishing, each and every position corresponds to descriptions to be found in different technical *tratis* about dance. It is usual for actual dance practitioners to study the temple images in order to learn with the utmost precision the positions of their own art, *choreogAtaphy*. *Cidambaram* pilgrims are mainly attracted during the period of June and *Deber*: they homage not only *fiva* but even his son *Ga†a* and *Va*, gods that have specific niches dedicated to both of them within the area of the sanctuary.

The seven cities (*ṣaptapur*)

The seven *acred* cities, being able to bestow liberation from the *cycle* of rebirths (*moksadfyin*), are: *Ayodhyē* (birthplace of the *hegod Rēma*, *Uttar Prade†*), *Mathurē* (seat of the cult of the bucolic deity *K%a*, *Uttar Prade†*), *Maya(puri)* (that is *Haridvā*, periodic seat of the mass meeting *kumbhamel,f* *UttarēkhaŽa*), *Kē†*, (that is *Vēēas*, *Uttar Prade†*), *Kē*, (seat of a *sankarite* coenobium *Tamī NēŽu*), *Avanti* (that is *Ujjayin*, periodic seat of the *kumbhamel,f* *Madhya Prade†*), and finally *Dvēravan*, (that is *Dvērakē*, capital city of the reign *K%a*, one of the †four abodeš, *cfr dhfm Gujarē*). As it is easy to observe, the circuit of the seven sacred cities links sites that are part on their own of other devotional circuits of pilgrimages (*cfr dhfm sankarite* coenobia). The strict interconnection of the knots of sacred geography in such a way intensely strenghtened, the intersection of the different devotional routes opens new perspectives to the free will of the crowds of pilgrims. In a certain *Way*, represents the ideal center of the circuit, its hard core due to the reason that through a net of mythical references all the other six cities are punctually reduplicated in it, through the mechanism of substitute or replacement

pilgrimage. The *raiva* part is not really prevalent in this game, as it should appear to be at a first glance. If we scan the list more attentively, we may easily ascertain that the first of the seven holy cities is dedicated to R \acute{e} ma, the second and the last ones are dedicated to \acute{V} ish \acute{n} u from the most relevant *avatf*ras of Vi \acute{s} ṇu. In effect, the most quoted list of *avatf*ras includes ten members: Matsya, K \acute{r} ma, Var \acute{c} ha, Nar \acute{a} sha, V \acute{e} mana, Para \acute{t} ur \acute{e} ma, R \acute{e} ma, Budd \acute{h} ma, Kalkin, all of them being called to put a remedy to different calamities afflicting humankind during different cosmic and mythic sequences of events according to the famous definition of the category of *avatf*ra included in the Bhagavadg \acute{t} (4,7-8: *yadf yadf hi dharmasya glfnir bhavati bhfrata | abhyutthfnam adharmasya tadftm \acute{y} as \acute{a} jfmy aham || [7] paritr \acute{t} fya sdfh \acute{n} \acute{v} inf \acute{f} ya ca du \acute{s} ktfm | dharmas \acute{a} sthfnfrthfya sabhavfmi yuge yuge || [8]*). For whenever of the right a languishing appears, o son of Bharata, a rising up of unright, then I send myself forth. For protection of the good, and for destruction of evil-doers, to make a firm footing of the right, I come into being in age after age[^], translated by Franklin Edgerton, Cambridge 1944).

On December, 6th, 1992, at the acme of a campaign organized by the fundamentalist rightwing party, instigated by the VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad, \acute{t} Hindu Plenary Congress[^], named *rath yftrf*, \acute{t} carriage pilgrimage[^], a sort of triumphal march by ~~took~~ place, with the intent to bring to Ayodhy \acute{e} the bricks necessary to build (according to the organizers, to reinstall) a temple dedicated to R \acute{e} ma. The objective of the march was to destroy the Babri Masjid, the Mosque Ayodhy \acute{e} dating back to the founder of the Mughal dynasty, B \acute{e} bur (Zah \acute{r} ud, 1483-1530 CE), according to VHP built over the ruins of the birthplace of R \acute{e} ma. The mosque was sacked and destroyed, and law enforcement did not oppose any real resistance.

R \acute{e} ma is bound to his mythical birthplace and capital city, Ayodhy \acute{e} , to his capital city, Dv \acute{e} rak \acute{e} . But K \acute{r} ma is bound even to the places being the theatre of his erotic juvenile exploits, first of all V \acute{o} nd \acute{e} vana (on the left shore of the Yamun \acute{e}), and to the city where he killed his enemy Ka \acute{c} sa, Mathur \acute{e} , not far from V \acute{o} nd \acute{e} vana.

The sign *li .ga*)

The circuit of the *rthas* creates a sort of specific mythical mapping of the territory, giving birth to a real geography of the sacred sphere, a dense net of signs. One of the most important subnets of this large net is the system of the twelve signs *li(jyotirli .ga)*. Etymologically, a *li .ga* is just a sign, e.g. the sign distinguishing the male gender from the female, that is the penis, and from a religious perspective, the sign of the pervading presence of the God *fiva* in a certain place. It would be conceptually wrong, and ethically limiting, to reduce *li .ga* to a phallic symbol: it is much more than this. It is the very emblem of the deity, and in its most evolute form it represents the link bounding together the divine the human and the universe, a sort of synthesis uniting the macrocosm and the microcosm. It may be made either of durable material (stone, metal, wood, earth), or temporary (being built and immediately destroyed after having finished the ritual act, e.g. made of sand); either ~~fixed~~ (placed into a sanctuary as a fixed cult object) or mobile (periodically brought in parade during festivals); either decorated or unadorned, with one or more or no divine faces on it. The icon of *fiva* known as *godbh \acute{e} vam \acute{r} ti* is a small figure of the *g \acute{b}* emerging out of a mandorla open at the middle of the, ~~shape~~ reminder of the supremacy of *fiva* over and beyond both Brah \acute{m} \acute{e} and \acute{b} h \acute{m} i.

It is possible to delineate the evolution of the iconography of the *li.ga*, starting from a primitive form clearly antropomorphic, where the features of a human penis are clearly noticeable, proceeding with an intermediate form, where a little figure of the deity is visible at the middle of the shaft, and concluding with a finally completely aniconic form of the divine, where the *li.ga* is a pure geometrical shape, an ellipsoid produced by the rotation of an ellipse around its longer axis.

Each and every *li.ga* built by human hands includes three parts: the inferior part of Brahman, that is the foundation stone of the structure, its basis; the middle part of, what is the shaft properly; and the superior part of Rudra the top of the icon. The iconography of the *li.ga* includes the optional presence of one, four or five faces of the god, these last corresponding to the four cardinal points plus the invisible zenith, this one representing the transcendent aspect of the god.

Normally *li.gas* are inserted into a base representing the vulva (*yo(hi)*), evoking the compresence of the goddess as the Potency (*shakti*) of *Shiva*. The vedantic interpretation of the *li.ga* loses entirely any antropomorphic feature of the symbol, transforming it into a *śaṅkha* mundi a macrocosmic emblem, that in its different parts includes the 36 principles of reality or categories (*tattva*), evoking all the different planes of existence. This sort of antropomorphisation and assimilation of the *li.ga* to a cosmography, is only the development of a process being already implicit into its earlier phases: in effect we must remember that the *li.ga* is never or rarely adored as a fertility symbol, it is in contrast the emblem of the virile potency used for ascetic goals and ends.

More than a single episode in the mythical cycle of *Shiva* underlines the fact that this god, being a model to be imitated by ascetics, begins he is venerated as *Yogeshvara*, master of yoga, takes a great care in order not to waste his virile semen. The ascetic practice of the retention of sperm is exemplified by the figure of the *dhvareṭas*, the character whose semen is turned upwards, the ascetic being able to avoid ejaculation and to have his semen turned upwards internally along the spinal column till to reach the *brahmarandhra* the hole of Brahman, the occipital fontanelle. In such a way he masters the sexual stimulus, avoids to waste his own potency and vital energy, and finally accumulates a superhuman ascetic power. It is not to be considered as fortuitous at all the fact that the *li.ga* represents an ever turgid erect penis, a *śaṅkha* subject to detumescence: it is not an organ of generation of life, but rather and more properly an accumulator of interior virile energy.

The twelve signs of light (*otirli . ga*)

The twelve *li.gas* of light form an important circuit of pilgrimage. They are: 1) *fr, somanatha* (Prabhavali, Saurashtra or Kutch district, Gujarat, on the shore of the Arabian Sea); 2) *fr, mallikarjuna* (mount *fr, taila*, along the river *Krishna*, Andhra Pradesh); 3) *fr, mahakaleshvara* (Mandla district, at Ujjain, along the river *Sipra*, Madhya Pradesh); 4) *fr, Keshava* (Mandla district, along the river *Narmada*, Madhya Pradesh); 5) *Kedarnatha* (Himachal Pradesh); 6) *fr, bh, matakara* (along the river *Bh, m*, hinterland of *Mu' ba*, Maharashtra); 7) *fr, vitvatara* (Vidhar, Uttar Pradesh); 8) *fr, tryambakesvara* (along the river *Godavari*, Nizampur district, Maharashtra); 9) *Vaidyanatha* (near *Jashpur*, Bihar); 10) *Nagesvara* (near *Dvaraka*, Gujarat); 11) *Setubandhakesvara* (on the island of same name between India and *fr, la. k*); 12)

Ghṛiṃśvarāśīṣa (near Daulatpur, Mahārāṣṭra). It is noticeable that in most cases the liṅga is situated near to a river, to the sea or to a mount; the only site in Southern India is Setubandha. Even the circuit of the twelve jyotiṅgas is duplicated within Vārāṇasī, Kāśī, being the real navel of the world for Indian pilgrimage.

The symbology of light is linked to the process of interiorization of the ancient Vedic sacrificial rite, process effected by the priestly class in the transition between Vedism and Brahmanism (the ancient phase preceeding Hinduism). Just as the Vedic ritual included the consumption of a living being within the sacrificial fire as part of an offer to the gods, in the same way the interiorized sacrificial process includes the consumption within the interior fire of knowledge of the transient components of human personality of the practitioner of the ritual: the darkness of nescience is burnt by the purificatory fire of gnosis.

A well known purāṇic myth narrates that in the ancient times Śiva appeared as a sign of fire (jyotiṅga) in order to restate his own supremacy above both Brahmā and Viṣṇu. In order to remember this primordial event, particularly in the sites of the twelve jyotiṅgas, people celebrate the festival of the night of Jyotiṅgaratri, in the 14th night of waning moon of the month either of Māgha (January/February) or of Phalguṇa (February/March). During this festival the night is dotted and enlightened with a plenty of countless lamps, being lighted by the devotees in order to imitate the bright divine pillar of fire.

Jyotiṅga, emerging out of the pillar of fire is particularly suitable to symbolize the redeeming fire of gnosis. Actually Jyotiṅga appears in this form in order to punish the excessive self-esteem of both Brahmā and Viṣṇu, engaged in a debate to establish who of them could be considered as the supreme deity. The pillar of light from which later will emerge the figure of Jyotiṅga in front of the two opponents, obliges them to search for its origin: Brahmā will go in search of its top, Viṣṇu of its bottom. Both will be unable to accomplish the quest, because the fire pillar is Jyotiṅga, and Jyotiṅga is endless, unlimited, infinite.

The seats of the Goddess (śakti, śha)

The Devabhāgavatapurāṇa narrates that Jyotiṅga destroyed by sorrow for the side of his beloved Śakti, put on his shoulders the corpse of his beloved and begun to wander throughout the whole world, being prey of an uncontrollable wrath. Worried about consequences of this behaviour, the gods asked Viṣṇu for help. He cut off the corpse into pieces, in such a way freeing Jyotiṅga from his burden of grief. The deceased body of the Goddess was scattered all over India. In this myth Jyotiṅga finds his confirmation as the god of transgression, Viṣṇu as the god of cosmic order and in this perspective the Goddess includes within herself the *coincidentia oppositorum*, being the Mother of the universe.

The 108 parts of Śakti's corpse are each of them a goal of pilgrimage. They correspond to the same amount of a list of traditional names of the Goddess, being venerated in a plenty of devotional hymns, named *śaṣṭi* or *śaṣṭi* hymns of names. Each part of the corpse gave origin to a seat of the Goddess on earth. Kāśī, fell on the ground Devī's face (Vārāṇasī, the lady with large eyes), at Kāśīmagiri (Assam) fell her vulva (Kāśīśekhara, she whose very name is pleasure). However, the most quoted lists (e.g. the list in *Mahābhārata* or the later traditions represented

by senior Tantric texts from Eastern India like *Pañjikāya* alias *Mahāpāñjikā*, (detailed description of seats) include only 51. The most celebrated out of them are *Kāśhī* (Kolkata) (toe of right foot, or alternatively the skull) and *Lalitā* in *Alakā* (thumb of the right hand). Comparing different lists it is possible to identify four main seats (*Para*, *Yoga* and *Guhyapada*) and 64 minor seats, according to the relative importance of the limbs of the Goddess being object of veneration.

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